TOWN OF EASTON, MARYLAND 1 **EASTON TOWN HALL** 2 3 14 S HARRISON STREET Washington Street Closure Workshop 4 5 **July 8, 2020 (amended)** 6 7 8 PRESENT AT CONVENING. 9 Mayor Robert C. Willey 10 11 Councilmember Alan I. Silverstein Councilmember Donald M. Abbatiello 12 Councilmember Ron E. Engle 13 Councilmember Megan M. Cook 14 15 Also present was the Town Manager Mr. Don Richardson, Town Attorney Mrs. Sharon 16 VanEmburgh, Town Clerk Mrs. Kathy M. Ruf, Town Engineer Rick VanEmburgh, Chief 17 David Spencer and Capt. Gregory Wright from Easton Police Department. Also present 18 was Discover Easton/Easton Business Alliance Director Ross Benincasa. 19 20 21 CALL TO ORDER. 22 President of the Council Mrs. Cook called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m. 23 Mr. Richardson stated the workshop was called to discuss the implementation of the 24 street closure on Washington Street. He stated there have been concerns regarding 25 parking and traffic. 26 Mr. Benincasa updated from Monday's evening and discussed receiving a call from Mr. 27 Paul Prager and representatives from Blue Point Hospitality with concerns. He discussed 28 concerns with diverting traffic on to Federal Street. Mr. Benincasa stated that Mr. Prager 29 has highlighted if the diversion of traffic down Federal Street and if the plans for the 30 promenade continues, he would stop his investments and businesses in Easton and his 31 contributions to nonprofit efforts in Talbot County and cited this project as the reason. 32 33 Mr. Benincasa stated that EBA does not agree with how Mr. Prager has voiced his concerns but dismissing his concerns would be negligent. He stated that closing of Blue 34 Point Hospitality's businesses would have a negative consequence on downtown. He 35 stated that there must be a compromise as there will be angry businesses. Mr. Benincasa 36 stated that the precedent this would set would not be a good look. 37 President Cook asked what the direct positive impact may have on the closure of 38 Washington Street. She stated she was unable to answer that question. 39 Mr. Benincasa stated that Washington Street Pub will have the best outcome as they do 40 not have outdoor seating now but would have 40 seats added with social distancing. 41 Mr. Silverstein discussed visiting Washington Street yesterday at 4:00 p.m. and parked in 42 a handicapped space. Mr. Silverstein discussed helping a driver get to a parking space 43 which was not easy. He stated it is a dangerous situation and finds the traffic patterns are 44 not user friendly. Mr. Silverstein stated he does not like barriers and are not indicative of 45 this community and he understands Mr. Prager's concerns. Mr. Prager has upgraded 46 buildings and put people to work. He stated he has talked to businesses and he feels this 47 48 product is rushed, due diligence not done and this plan does not work for the businesses. 49 Mr. Silverstein stated that Discover Easton is supposed to be working as an arm of the Town of Easton. He said in his opinion it is a cluster and he understands the importance 50 for the businesses. Mr. Silverstein stated that it was time to say it was an experiment and 51 it's time to pull the plug and remove the barricades. Mr. Silverstein complimented on 52 trying to help businesses but suggested finding other ways. He stated streets are crowded, 53

events will be crowded and COVID is still prevalent.

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55 Mr. Benincasa stated that it should be noted that it hasn't even started yet. He stated they 56 have concerns as well such as handicapped parking. He stated that they have three other 57 plans for consideration.

Mr. Silverstein stated he made a mistake voting for it and he wants to correct his mistake.

Chief Spencer stated that from their perspective, closing Washington Street, closing the main thorofare was not a great idea. Dover and West and Federal and West have had near misses and accidents with the added stop signs. The traffic flow is not going to work and there is a safety issue.

President Cook discussed the process and the decision for closing the streets. She stated that the plan had the greatest impact on traffic but was the safest of the plans.

Mayor Willey discussed businesses calling and not being in favor of the proposal. He stated the proposal should have been well vetted. Mayor Willey discussed the Fire Department's emergency services. He stated that the proposal should have been tweaked before it got to this.

Mr. Jeff Schneider, General Manager Hampton Inn and Board member of Discover Easton stated there have been good points made and people are scared to go out COVID 19. He stated that they have been working on this plan for five weeks. Mr. Schneider stated that closing Washington street was not the first consideration; it was decided to implement for safety concerns. He stated that they are just trying to help and there are a lot of people excited for this. Mr. Schneider stated that there are at least five businesses getting ready to close. He stated it is a nasty precedent to consider the pressure from Mr. Prager.

Mr. Richard Marks, not a business owner in downtown Easton stated he hopes that this much attention gets paid to overall safety and traffic in town. He discussed humanitarian and fundraising efforts that have shown up on Facebook.

Mr. Steve Mangasarian stated he has been downtown for 25 years and lived downtown for 18 years. He stated that closing Washington Street permanently was not discussed with him and he actually feels it hurts businesses in the area. He discussed traffic patterns and concerns. Mr. Mangasarian stated that this has not been thought out. If you want to help businesses, there are other ways to help downtown. Mr. Mangasarian stated he doesn't want Washington Street closed and he doesn't want the extra traffic.

Mr. Doug Kirby, General Manager at Washington Street Pub, stated he has been a citizen for 43 years. He stated that fun activities need to be brought to the downtown; things such as St. Michaels and Cambridge are doing. It is an entertainment district and it's time for a change. He stated he has rented tables and ordered \$2,000 in food. He stated that listening to one person is like listening to a terrorist.

Captain Wright challenges anyone to say he wasn't vocal about the traffic. He discussed traffic management and stated it was never solved. He stated this project has been rushed. A lot of people are running stop signs. Capt. Wright stated that Washington street is a major corridor and he has stated he has been opposed to this.

President Cook asked Capt. Wright if the traffic management obstacles can be overcome. Captain Wright stated that the Police Department has been given two work sessions to fix a problem that deserves a lot more.

Mr. Engle stated he was disappointed at the major opposition. Most of the businesses he talked to seemed very positive and this has caught him off guard. Based on the merchants he talked to, they were in favor of the proposal.

Mr. Abbatiello stated that the last 24 hours have been very educational in local government. He stated that maybe the idea was rushed. He stated he is learning on the go, and may make mistakes. Mr. Abbatiello stated he should have asked more questions about design and safety. He stated that he hopes the citizens of the town start supporting the downtown as they need to step up and help out.

President Cook stated that she feels we need to help downtown businesses. She stated 106 107 that she has heard complaints from Easton Police Department but feels we need to try something. She stated that other communities are doing this successfully. She stated that 108 she wants to stay flexible and she is not ready to give up on the idea although she feels 109 everything can be improved. 110 Mr. Silverstein stated that the police department has said it's not a good plan. He agrees 111 that businesses need help. 112 Mr. Benincasa stated it's been a tough process. If there's a motion, he wants to 113 immediately have discussions about what would help the businesses downtown. 114 Mrs. Cook asked if there is time to talk to the businesses and get a plan in place. 115 Mr. Benincasa stated there is a financial implication to taking them up and down. 116 Mr. Engle stated he is not in favor of having any type of meeting with not everyone 117 involved. 118 Mr. Paul Prager was present and stated he is in favor of things getting back to how they 119 are. He stated with the proposal, the ambulance has a longer ride to the hospital He stated 120 that s city planning and traffic consultant would be important before a radical decision is 121 made. He asked the council to exercise care and be prudent and thoughtful regarding all 122 the businesses. He stated that the council is required to exercise care and diligence. Mr. 123 Prager asked the council to make legitimate goals with supporting data. He stated that 124 this plan lacks science and it's not safe; it's ugly. The council needs to have the courage 125 to acknowledge the mistake and take it down. Mr. Prager stated he doesn't think the 126 council has done a good job. He stated that the plan is not representative of the care of 127 this community. Mr. Prager stated that he is disappointed in this process and that he has 128 been called a terrorist. He discussed the pandemic and how rules have been established. 129 Mr. Prager stated that the plan has been established by going about it all the wrong way. 130 Mr. Prager stated he deeply loves the community and asked the council to do real 131 planning with real budgets. 132 Mr. Silverstein stated he did vote in favor but is big enough to say he made a mistake. 133 Mr. Silverstein made a motion to remove the barriers, go back to the drawing board and 134 meet with the merchants and see about other ways of assisting them rather than closing 135 the main thorofare thru our community; and if we have to then come back and make 136 some determinations how we can be helpful. The pandemic hopefully will not be here 137 forever and the businesses should be helped with compensation if appropriate because it's 138 not his fault he ordered the food in anticipation of the promenade. He stated he is looking 139 at what the police are telling him and when the public safety experts are saying this is not 140 good and their attorney is going to take a look at the record and come back after us and 141 draining and jeopardize the community. He stated that tomorrow we should start draining 142 and pulling them and come up with different solutions that don't include closing 143 Washington Street. 144 President Cook stated that to be clear, Mr. Silverstein wants to not close Washington 145 Street but continue conversations with businesses for another plan. 146 Mr. Silverstein stated he wants to get everybody, especially business owners in a room to 147 talk about solutions. 148 Mr. Silverstein's motion was seconded by Mr. Abbatiello and carried 3-0 with President 149 Cook abstaining. 150 At 2:31 p.m., upon motion by Mr. Silverstein seconded by Mr. Engle and carried 151 unanimously, President Cook adjourned the workshop meeting. 152 153

Kathy M. Ruf, Town Clerk (approved August 17, 2020)

Respectfully submitted,

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